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ABSTRACT

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared the United States "A Nation at Risk" because of inadequate education. A decade and a half later, the United States is still at risk because U.S. schools are failing children. Dropout rates have declined, and college attendance has risen, but student achievement has remained flat and college remediation rates have risen to unprecedented levels. The United States is the only country in the world in which children fall farther behind the longer they stay in school. In fact, a dual school system is developing, with a widening gap between good schools and poor schools. Poor and minority children usually go to worse schools, and their families have the least power to alter bad situations. Power over the education system has increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few who really don't want change. Equal educational opportunity is the next great civil rights frontier. The main strategies for change should center on standards, assessment, and accountability and allow for pluralism, competition, and choice to ensure the best for all children. (Contains five references.) (SLD)

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A Nation Still At Risk

by The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

This Digest was adapted from "A Nation Still *At Risk", an education manifesto signed by 37 prominent education reformers in April 1998 (See Additional Readings at the end of this Digest.)*

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared the United States *A Nation at Risk*. That citizens' panel admonished the American people that *the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people*. A decade and a half later, the risk posed by inadequate education has changed. Our nation today does not face imminent danger of economic decline or technological inferiority. Yet the state of our children's education is still very far from where it ought to be. Unfortunately, the economic boom times have made many Americans indifferent to poor educational achievement. Despite continuing indicators of inadequacy, and the risk that this poses to our future, much of the public shrugs and says, "Whatever."

The purpose of this digest is to awaken Americans once again to the fact that U.S. schools are still failing our youth and demand that changes be made. Since 1983, over 10 million Americans have reached the 12th grade not even having learned to read at a basic level. In the same period, over 6 million Americans dropped out of high school altogether. The numbers are even bleaker in minority communities. In 1996, 13% of all African Americans aged 16-to-24 were not in school and did not hold a diploma. Seventeen percent of first generation Hispanics had dropped out of high school, including a tragic 44% of Hispanic immigrants in this age group. To be sure, there have been gains during this past 15 years, many of them inspired by the Excellence Commission's clarion call. Dropout rates declined and college attendance rose. More high-school students are enrolling in more challenging academic courses. With more students taking more courses and staying in school longer, it is indeed puzzling that student achievement has remained largely flat and that college remediation rates have risen to unprecedented levels.

The Risk Today

Internationally, U.S. youngsters hold their own at the elementary level but falter in the middle years and drop far behind in high school. We seem to be the only country in the world whose children fall farther behind the longer they stay in school. That is true of our advanced students and our so-called good schools, as well as those in the middle. Remediation is rampant in college, with some 30% of entering freshmen in need of remedial courses in reading, writing and mathematics. Employers report difficulty finding people to hire who have the skills, knowledge, habits, and attitudes they require for technologically sophisticated positions. Though the pay they offer is excellent, the supply of competent U.S.-educated workers is too meager to fill the available jobs.

In the midst of our flourishing economy, we are recreating a dual school system, separate and unequal, almost half a century after it was declared unconstitutional. We face a widening and unacceptable chasm between good schools and bad, between those youngsters who get an adequate education and those who emerge from school barely able to read and write. Poor and minority children usually go to worse schools, have less expected of them, are taught by less knowledgeable teachers, and have the least power to alter bad situations.

If we continue to sustain this chasm between the educational haves and have-nots, our nation will face cultural, moral and civic peril. During the past 30 years, we have witnessed a cheapening and coarsening of many facets of our lives. We see it, among other places, in the squalid fare on television and in the movies. Obviously the school is not primarily responsible for this degradation of culture. But we should be able to rely on our schools to counter the worst aspects of popular culture, to fortify students with standards, judgment and character.

Delusion and Indifference

Regrettably, some educators and commentators have responded to the persistence of mediocre performance by engaging in denial, self-delusion, and blame shifting. Instead of acknowledging that there are real and urgent problems, they deny that there are any problems at all. Broad hints are dropped that, if there is a problem, it's confined to other people's children in other communities. Then, of course, there is the fantasy that America's education crisis is a fraud, something invented by enemies of public schools. And there is the worrisome conviction of millions of parents that, whatever may be ailing U.S. education in general, "my kid's school is OK."

Now is no time for complacency. Such illusions and denials endanger the nation's future and the future of today's children. Good education has become absolutely indispensable for economic success, both for individuals and for American society. Good education is the great equalizer of American society. Horace Mann termed it the "balance wheel of the social machinery," and that is even more valid now. As we become more of a meritocracy the quality of one's education matters more. That creates both unprecedented opportunities for those who once would have found the door barred – and huge new hurdles for those burdened by inferior education. America today faces a profound test of its commitment to equal educational opportunity. This is a test of whether we truly intend to educate all our children or merely keep everyone in school for a certain number of years; of whether we will settle for low levels of performance by most youngsters and excellence from only an elite few.

The Real Issue is Power

The Excellence Commission had the right diagnosis but was vague as to the cure. The commissioners trusted that good advice would be followed, that the system would somehow fix itself, and that top-down reforms would suffice. They spoke of "reforming our educational system in fundamental ways." But they did not offer a political or structural-change strategy to turn these reforms into reality. They underestimated, too, the resilience of the status quo and the strength of the interests wedded to it. The problem was not that the Excellence Commission had to content itself with words. In fact, its stirring prose performed an important service. No, the problem was that the Commission took the old ground rules for granted. In urging the education system to do more and better, it assumed that the system had the capacity and the will to change.

Alas, this was not true. Power over our education system has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few who don't really want things to change, not substantially, not in ways that would really matter. The education system's power brokers responded to the commission, but only a little. The Commission asked for a yard, and the "stakeholders" gave an inch. Hence much of *A Nation At Risk*'s wise counsel went unheeded, and its sense of urgency has ebbed.

Today we understand that vast institutions don't change just because they should – especially when they enjoy monopolies. They change only when they must, only when their survival demands it. In

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other parts of American life, stodgy, self-interested monopolies are not tolerated. They have been busted up and alternatives created as we have realized that large bureaucratic structures are inherently inefficient and unproductive. The private sector figured this out decades ago. The countries of the former Soviet empire are grasping it. Even our federal government is trying to "reinvent" itself around principles of competition and choice. President Clinton has declared that "the era of big government is over." It should now be clear to all that the era of big government monopoly of public education needs to end as well.

The fortunate among us continue to thrive within and around the existing education system, having learned how to use it, to bend its rules and to sidestep its limitations. The well-to-do and powerful know how to coexist with the system, even to exploit it for the benefit of their children. They supplement it. They move in search of the best it has to offer. They pay for alternatives. But millions of Americans – mainly the children of the poor and minorities – don't enjoy these options. They are stuck with what "the system" dishes out to them, and all too often they are stuck with the least qualified teachers, the most rigid bureaucratic structures, the fewest choices and the shoddiest quality. Those parents who yearn for something better for their children lack the power to make it happen. They lack the power to shape their own lives and those of their children.

The Next Civil Rights Frontier

Equal educational opportunity is the next great civil rights issue. We refer to the true equality of opportunity that results from providing every child with a first-rate primary and secondary education, and to the development of human potential that comes from meeting intellectual, social, and spiritual challenges. The educational gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students are huge, handicapping poor children in their pursuit of higher education, good jobs, and a better life. In today's schools, far too many disadvantaged and minority students are not being challenged. Far too many are left to fend for themselves when they need instruction and direction from highly qualified teachers. Far too many are passed from grade to grade, left to sink or swim. Far too many are advanced without ever learning how to read, though proven methods of teaching reading are now well-known. They are given shoddy imitations of real academic content, today's equivalent of Jim Crow math and back-of-the-bus science.

We have some excellent schools– we obviously know how to create them – and yet we offer an excellent education only to some children. And that bleak truth is joined to another: only some families have the power to shape their children's education. This reality can only be altered by shifting power away from the system. That is why education has become a civil-rights issue. If the system gets to decide whether you will receive it or not, it's not a right. It's only a right when it belongs to you and you have the power to exercise it as you see fit.

Strategies for Change

There should be two main renewal strategies, working in tandem:

- *Standards, assessments and accountability.* Every student, school and district must be expected to meet high standards of learning. Parents must be fully informed about the progress of their child and their child's school. District and state officials must reward success and have the capacity – and the obligation – to intervene in cases of failure.

- *Pluralism, competition and choice.* We must be as open to alternatives in the delivery of education as we are firm about the knowledge and skills being delivered. Families and communities have different tastes and priorities, and educators have different strengths and passions. It is madness to continue acting as if one school model fits every situation – and it is a sin to make a child attend a bad school if there's a better one across the street.

Hope for the Next American Century

Good things are already happening here and there. Charter schools are proliferating. Privately managed public schools have long waiting lists. Choices are spreading. Standards are being written and rewritten. Changes are being made. However, they are still exceptions. We must never again assume that the education system will respond to good advice. It will change only when power relationships change, particularly when all parents gain the power to decide where their children go to school.

The stakes could not be higher. What is at stake is America's ability to provide all its daughters and sons with necessary skills and knowledge, with environments for learning that are safe for children and teachers, with schools in which every teacher is excellent and learning is central. What is at stake is parents' confidence that their children's future will be bright thanks to the excellent education that they are getting; taxpayers' confidence that the money they are spending on public education is well spent; employers' confidence that the typical graduate of a typical U.S. high school will be ready for the workplace; and our citizens' confidence that American education is among the best in the world.

But even more is at stake than our future prosperity. Despite this country's mostly admirable utilitarianism when it comes to education, good education is not just about readiness. Test scores are important, but so are standards and excellence in our society. The decisions we make about education are really decisions about the kind of country we want to be; the sort of society in which we want to raise our children; the future we want them to have; and even – and perhaps especially – about the content of their character and the architecture of their souls. In the last decade of this American Century, we must not be content with anything less than the best for all the children.

Additional Readings

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Also see http://www.edexcellence.net/library/download.htm for a large collection of related readings.

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